

Julia LeBeau was an accomplished and classically trained musician from Bloomington. From the tender age of three, she became fascinated by music and musical instruments and began playing on a homemade xylophone. She passed on her passion for music to others after becoming a music teacher, a career that spanned more than 40 years. However, she was most well known as being the maestro of the homemade tin can xylophone built by her father.

Born on June 20, 1903 in Bloomington, Illinois, Julia was the only child born to George and Nettie (Dunn) LeBeau, Jr. As the story goes, a three-year-old Julia became enamored with the percussionist in the orchestra pit of a silent movies that she attended with her parents. She was particularly keen on having a set of bells and mallets to make melodious sounds on her own. Her father, George, said it would be too expensive for a three-year-old to have a xylophone. But Julia was persistent and her father was indulgent, so he suggested that Julia save tin cans from the kitchen and he would construct a homemade xylophone for his precocious daughter. And he was as good as his word.

The “freak instrument” (in the words of *The Pantagraph*) consisted of two rows of empty tin cans (there were 32 and later 34 in number) of various sizes and types, including pork and bean, shrimp, spinach, lima bean and tomato cans. The cans were arranged to the musical scale, with tomato and spinach cans, for instance, producing the bass notes, and shrimp cans the high soprano notes. And the whole thing was hinged so it could be folded in half to fit into a traveling case.

The family moved to East St. Louis when Julia was still a child, and by the age of six she was “playing the cans” to audiences in the St. Louis area. The LeBeaus returned to Bloomington in 1918, and after Julia graduated from high school she continued to live at the family residence, 606 South McLean Street, for much of her adult life (she never married).

LeBeau was a well-respected musician who played the saxophone, violin and conventional xylophone. She became a central figure in the city’s remarkably rich violin culture. LeBeau studied violin under Herbert Butler of Chicago’s American Conservatory of Music. In Bloomington she was closely associated with the Lynn E. Hersey Violin School, eventually become a staff member of the school for a time before establishing the Julia LeBeau School of Music, where she taught violin, saxophone and xylophone (and later clarinet and viola).

In the 1920s, LeBeau performed as part of an extended chautauqua tour, and also took her own ensemble to California. In Bloomington, violin recitals by LeBeau at the Unitarian and Second Presbyterian churches drew hundreds of music lovers as she performed the works of Handel, Debussy, Alfredo d'Ambrosio, Bloomington’s own Cecil Burleigh and others.

In 1939, LeBeau traveled to New York City to play her tin can xylophone on the NBC radio show “Hobby Lobby” (not to be confused with today’s retail store) in which regular folk “lobbied for their hobby.” A few years later during World War II LeBeau and her

one-of-a-kind xylophone attracted the attention of the U.S. Army, though she begged off an invitation for an overseas USO-type tour, certain she didn't want to be away from home too long.

She returned to the "Hobby Lobby" radio program in February 1948 when it traveled to Chicago for a trade show. LeBeau explained to longtime host Dave Elman ("the dean of American hobbyists") how she tuned each can with a carpenter's hammer. "If you want to raise the tone, you press down on the top of the can," she told Elman and his listening audience. "To lower the tone, you push up on the top of the can from the open end. I just keep pushin' and shovin' until I get them tuned."

Without missing a beat, Elman asked LeBeau which cans produced the best tone. "I guess it's a tossup between the lima beans and the spinach," she replied.

On November 17, 1988, an 85-year-old LeBeau appeared before a national audience on "The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson." The following year, the annual Gala Concert organized by Gellert Modos, professor of piano at Illinois State University, featured LeBeau on her now-celebrated tin can xylophone. That night she also received a plaque naming her "Musician of the Year and Bloomington's Ambassador."

Julia LeBeau passed away on June 11, 1994, at the age of 90. She was laid to rest at Park Hill Cemetery in Bloomington.

The collections of the McLean County Museum of History include the tin can xylophone, donated by LeBeau's close friend Charles Ridenour in 1994. Although most—if not all—of the cans are more than a century old, some still have their original labels, such as two from the Bloomington Canning Co.

The Museum has also posted "The Tonight Show" appearance from 1988 on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGzyisugHIQ>) so those interested can watch a delightful Julia LeBeau more than hold her own against Johnny Carson before she plays "Don't Fence Me In" by Cole Porter.

By Bill Kemp, 2014

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